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ABSTRACT

Former presidential press secretary Larry Speakes' confession that he manufactured a quote for President Reagan at the November 1987 summit in Geneva, Switzerland, created a firestorm which cost Speakes dearly, raised serious problems about the ethics of public relations practitioners, and contained broad implications for the profession. A study examined: the contrast between the ethical practices of journalists and public relations practitioners in terms of their perceptions of "truth" and "confidentiality"; the conflicting theories on measurement of public relations effectiveness on the premise that "you achieve what you seek to measure"; and the implications of the Speakes controversy for public relations ethics. Information packets on the Speakes controversy and on public relations measurement and evaluation were obtained from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Information Center. These items were contrasted with several papers on measurement presented at research sessions for either the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Public Relations Division or the PRSA Educators Section. The findings suggest that (1) if PRSA had practiced cognitive consistency--taking into consideration existing beliefs--it would have emphasized the "loyalty" items in its Code to condemn Speakes' actions rather than its "truth" items; and (2) both Speakes and PRSA may have been led to take self-defeating actions because they were thinking of short-term, narrowly focused benefits rather than of the larger picture. (Thirty-four references are listed. (MS)

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EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS: LESSON FROM LARRY SPEAKES

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By John S. Detweiler, APR

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Former presidential press secretary Larry Speakes said he exercised his "P.R. man's license" when he manufactured a quote for President Reagan at the November 1987 summit in Geneva, Switzerland (Speakes, 1988, p. 136). He mentioned the incident as a confession, saying "I was clearly wrong to take such liberties." While confession may be good for the soul, his account of the incident created a firestorm which cost Speakes dearly and raised serious problems about the ethics of public relations practitioners.

In January 1987, at the end of six years as serving as Reagan's press secretary, Speakes told a Washington Press Club audience that he wanted his epitaph to read: "He told the truth...always" (Speakes, 1987). Yet, it was his candor about two instances in which he attributed quotes to Reagan that the president did not utter which later was to prove his undoing.

Unfortunately, much of the discussion about Speakes' actions has focused on the individual and the incident or incidents in question. Speakes' admission has broader implications for the profession. This study begins by examining the contrast between the ethical practices of journalists and public relations in terms of their perceptions of "truth" and "confidentiality." It goes further to use the

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Speakes controversy to examine conflicting theories on measurement of public relations effectiveness on the premise that "you achieve what you seek to measure." It seeks to address both ethics and measurement in terms of "excellence" in public relations.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study seeks to analyze the implications of the Speakes' controversy for public relations ethics. In examining the various comments made by experienced practitioners at Speakes' revelations of manufactured Reagan quotes it seeks to more clearly define what constitutes "false or misleading information" or information which might "compromise the integrity" of the news media under the PRSA Code of Professional Standards.

It also seeks to analyze Speakes' revelations in terms of the ethics of confidentiality imposed upon public relations practitioners by the PRSA Code of Professional Standards:

In addition to ethics, the study also seeks to draw some distinction between conflicting theories of public relations measurement and evaluation. It attempts to demonstrate how differences in techniques for measuring short-term campaign objectives and for measuring long-term relationships can produce different standards of "excellence" for public relations activities.

Of particular concern is the professional literature about quantitative research in public relations which, unfortunately, seems to reflect management's primary interest

in short-term results. Characteristic of this type of research is the description provided by Booth:

> ...the biggest challenge is how to quantify the results of a public relations program. In today's belt-tightening business environment, counting clips won't satisfy Corporate America. Clients want to know: What have we accomplished? Says Dr. Lloyd Kirban, senior vice president and director of research for Burson-Marsteller, "We are in the communication business. We are supposed to do something to the audience. Output--the number of clips, TV appearances, etc.--is no longer a sufficient measurement of success. We have to show that changes in behavior occurred as a result of target audience exposure. Clients want to know if the needle moved" (1986, p. 26).

THE ETHICS OF TRUTH

In January 1987, his last day on the job after 2,000 press briefings over a six-year period with Reagan, Speakes spoke to the Washington Press Club. He said:

> I think a press spokesman--and I've said this so many times--has only one arrow in his quiver, and that's the truth. If you ever lose the respect you have for the truth...the respect that the press corps has that you are telling the truth...you, not the press corps, are out of business. That's the only thing you've got--your credibility (Speakes, 1987).

The Speakes controversy began when journalists sought to bring the former press secretary's credibility into question. Journalists took his comment about the "P.R. man's license" and sought reaction to it from public relations professionals. In essence, the public relations practitioners were asked either to repudiate Speakes' behavior or to acknowledge that public relations practitioners have a sliding scale when it comes to the truth.

One of the fundamental distinctions in ethical behavior is determining what ethical standards are absolute and what standards are situational (Sharpe, 3). To the journalist and seemingly to Speakes, truth is obviously an absolute. Therefore, reporters sought to have public relations practitioners affirm or reject this unquestionable standard. However, for some public relations practitioners reacting to the Speakes controversy, the absolute standard of truth imposed by the journalists raises some practical problems. Carried to the extreme, this would rule out the "manufactured quote" altogether. The public relations practitioner would essentially be confined to being a "journalist in residence"--someone who copied down meaningful quotes from key organizational officials or clients and relayed them to the news media.

Public relations practitioners recognize that their communication responsibilities must be broader than the journalistic model. In most cases, organizational officials look to the public relations practitioners as a source of appropriate comments to be conveyed through the news media to relevant publics. At this point the "situational" nature of truth enters the equation. For one, the manufactured quote becomes the truth if it is actually uttered in public by the person to whom the quote is attributed. For another, the manufactured quote is true if the appropriate official sees it and "signs off on it" as something he or she would want to say at an appropriate time. An even broader "situational" approach to truth, which Speakes described as the "P.R. man's license," is when the PRSA code is interpreted to mean "false

and misleading" rather than "false or misleading." In this case, the quote may never exist as an actual utterance and the person to whom it is attributed may not be aware that it has been publicized, but it clearly carries out a communications objective of the individual being quoted. It is not "misleading"--it truthfully represents the communications objective of the individual in question. However, the transgression involved might more appropriately be termed a "fabricated quote" than a "manufactured quote."

As public relations practitioners expressed their views on the Speakes controversy, all three of these approaches to manufactured or fabricated quotes--and a few more--were expressed. There appeared to be no unanimity on the part of experienced professionals about the nature of truth in such a context. Many recognized there are times in which public relations practitioners must speak for top executives whose views are well known to them. They vary on how active those executives must be in justifying such a disclosure. None would support any devious effort to distort an utterance to the point that it misleads the public or deceives the media as to the views of the person being quoted.

THE ETHICS OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is as much a part of the Public Relations Code of Professional Standards as truth. Article 1 of the Code says:

"A member shall deal fairly with clients or employers, past, present, or potential, with fellow practitioners, and the general public." Implicit in the imperative to deal fairly with the client is the question of confidentiality.

In his farewell speech to the Capital Press Corps, Speakes discussed the intimate role of the press secretary and the president. He noted that the press secretary and president had to have frank discussions, with the president telling the press secretary everything. Such a relationship, he said, "lets the press know that the press secretary knows what he is talking about, and that when he speaks, the president is speaking" (Speakes, 1987).

To protect this frank relationship, public relations professionals recognize that they must respect the difference between confidential information shared with their superiors and information ready for public distribution.

Newsmen also have traditionally benefited from and protected confidential relationships. However, such relationships have recently come into question. A Minnesota public relations man recently won a case in which the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star-Tribune and St. Paul Pioneer Post Dispatch were each assessed $350,000 for violating their reporters' promises of confidentiality.

Star-Tribune editors testified during the trial that after hours of debate they decided to identify a political worker, Dan Cohen, as the source of court documents which showed a candidate for lieutenant governor had been convicted of shoplifting 12 years earlier. The editors said the source of the documents, a representative of the opposing candidate's

staff, was as important to the story as the revelation itself. (Social Science Monitor, 1988).

Even in the Speakes case, where Speakes could be said to have betrayed his confidential relationship with the president, the news media's ethic of openness seems to favor disclosure. In an editorial entitled, "Kiss-and-tell books serve the public," USA Today commented:

> ...Some Republicans are distressed that Speakes confessed he invented words that he attributed to the president. Indeed, Speakes has apologized for hurting the president.
>
> But information about every president--sometimes even the trite and trivial--can help the public better understand the leader of the free world...It's ironic but true: Books that "betray" the president can actually benefit the public (5/13/88).

Such actions suggest that confidentiality is clearly a situational value to journalists. However, many public relations practitioners examine the Speakes disclosures from the humble perspective of a "ghost writer." They recognize that those who manufacture quotes for their superiors are permanently bound to credit those quotes to their superiors--and not at some later date take credit for those comments which the public relations practitioner finds particularly engaging or enduring. In this context, confidentiality in public relations is an absolute value.

BACKGROUNDING THE CONTROVERSY

First, let's review Speakes position as presidential press secretary to Ronald Reagan at Geneva. In his book, he expressed his fear of Reagan losing out to Gorbachev in media relations:

> I felt that Gorbachev was really getting the advantage over us in his give and take with reporters, while Reagan was very tentative and stilted. (Gorbachev) took (a) question and literally blasted it out of the ballpark and broke the windows across the street. The comment showed his ability, his agility, his way of operating in a good give-and-take atmosphere and accomplishing what he set out to accomplish (p. 135-136).

"Fearing that Reagan was losing the media version of Star Wars," Speakes started the process which led him to later release to the media his manufactured quote, which he attributed to Reagan as the president and Gorbachev were standing together at the closing session: "There is much that divides us, but I believe the world breathes easier because we are talking here tonight" (p. 136).

In an interview with reporter Steve Swartz of the Wall Street Journal (4/18/88), following his resignation from Merrill Lynch & Co., Speakes expresses the hope that his revelation of such a fabricated quote would lead to a broader discussion about the role of press aides.

Speakes noted that in the book he condemned the practice, "and I am condemning it now." He added that he included the reference in the book because he believes this activity "is done all too often" and needs to be discussed at greater length. Speakes said the dilemma arose because he believes there is an unusual "dichotomy" in the job of presidential press secretary in that the job entails not only a responsibility to accurately inform the nation but also to "see that the president is presented in the best light" (Wall Street Journal, 4/18/88).

In the controversial aftermath which followed Speakes' revelations, Speakes said he had informed President Reagan about the quotation shortly after it was uttered. However,

the President said he couldn't recall such a briefing. In the book Speakes assumed that the President would not disavow the words, but he did express concern that the Soviets might contend that Reagan's conversation with Gorbachev never took place. Gorbachev, however, remained silent about the incident.

Reaction of Profession to Controversy

The first people to be contacted by the press for reaction to Speakes' revelations about the fabricated quotes were officials of the Public Relations Society of America.

Much of the interaction with the media at this point dealt with the legalities of the situation. Was Speakes a member of PRSA and therefore governed by its code? Was he a member when the fabricated quote was uttered? Could a PRSA member comment on a situation without impairing the review procedures for ethical indiscretions under its code?

Beyond these technical considerations, PRSA officials seemed to indicate clearly that Speakes' "P.R. man's license" violated professional standards.

Isobel Parke, national secretary, was the highest national officer available for comment when the controversy broke. She cited Article 7 of PRSA Code: "A member shall not intentionally communicate false or misleading information and is obliged to use care to avoid communication of false or misleading information." She added, "If any individual deliberately fabricates quotations it will indeed damage his trustworthiness, particularly with the press" (Associated Press, 4/14/88).

In a follow-up news release the next day, quoting President Dwayne Summar, PRSA cited three additional potential violations of its code:

--deal fairly with employers and general public (Article 1);

--conduct their professional lives in accord with the public interest (Article 2);

--adhere to truth and accuracy (Article 3).

Of course, citing potential violations of the code does not make a direct judgment on Speakes' behavior or set a clear standard of what is or is not ethical in such circumstances. This study seeks to go beyond the particulars of the Speakes controversy to a broader ethical perspective. For instance, do the general standards of the profession cited by Summar realistically apply to the demanding job of the presidential press secretary? One very potent observer, Sheila Tate, campaign press aide for Vice President George Bush and the person likely to be his presidential press secretary, had this to say:

> In my sadness for my friend of ten years I now read about PRSA condemnation and opinion pieces by publicists who feel it necessary to remind the "profession" about the importance of being truthful in PR. Pardon me while my stomach turns. ...The pressure for speaking for a President is indescribable. Imagine for a moment the possibility of having every word you utter heard round the world. And I do mean every word. A remark at a cocktail party. A joke with a colleague. A moment of annoyance.
>
> If I know Larry as well as I believe, he is facing the consequences of what he did, assessing the impact, deciding how to learn from the experience and developing a realistic plan to move forward from here. He has learned some personally painful and costly lessons.
>
> What I see happening in the pages of PR Week and elsewhere is an unseemly scramble by members of our "craft" to seize the moral high ground on the back of a fallen colleague. It is not a pretty picture (PR Week, 5/9/88).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

This study begins with an examination of Speakes' achievements over time--for three "clients," with three separate objectives, and three quite different expected outcomes. In such a review, whether Speakes' actions constitute excellent public relations is determined to a large degree by what you measure. If each of Speakes' three achievements are measured independently, using the customary outcome measures employed by practitioners for such public relations activities, he achieved outstanding success. None of those measures, incidentally, are concerned with the question of truth or deception. If Speakes' actions are assessed more broadly, however, in terms of measures which can be applied to long-lasting, mutually-supporting relationships, his associations with the Washington press corps, the Reagan White House, and Merrill Lynch obviously portend a disaster.

In this instance the well-known case study of Larry Speakes is used to draw similar conclusions about public relations evaluation as an earlier, more theoretical study by Pearson (1986) in which he discusses "the paradox of measurability." Pearson first discusses the public relations models developed by Grunig (1984, p. 8)--the press agentry/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetric model and the two-way symmetric model--and Ehling's public relations theory (1984, 1985) in which he contrasts simple message dissemination with message exchange, calling the latter "communication-as-conversation".

In discussing public relations evaluation and measurement, Pearson comments:

> The trend toward evaluation and measurement has been forced on public relations by economic conditions and can be explained largely by the profession's response to the demand for increased accountability. Moreover, the trend has been good for public relations and has compelled the profession to give up the notion that what it achieved was intangible and nebulous. It must be noted, however, that framing specific, achievable and measurable objectives forces a practitioner to view the world in a way that is quite at odds with the emerging systems approach in public relations. The holistic world of systems theory is not susceptible of the kind of analysis that reveals measurable results.
>
> For instance, to distinguish between source and receiver in a communication situation--a necessary step for a researcher interested in the impact of a message--is to engage in a process of analysis that draws a communicator back into an asymmetrical mode of communication. For as soon as a communicator's partner in communication is envisioned as the 'receiver' of messages, the spell is broken, symmetry is lost. This suggests a tension exists in current public relations theorizing between what are two fundamentally different ways of thinking about the discipline, for it appears modes of analysis which isolate variables for study are a threat to the kind of symmetry and conversation Grunig, Hunt and Ehling write about (1986, p. 12).

Trujillo and Toth (1986) also deal with measurement cptions, discussing three broad paradigms from organizational research--functionalist, interpretive and critical. Like Pearson, they suggest that organizational managers, who employ largely an economic perspective in determining public relations effectiveness, do not fully comprehend what public relations is designed to accomplish.

For instance, in contrasting the "functionalist" and "interpretive" approaches of organizational life, these authors state:

> While functionalist research examines how phenomena like hierarchies and technologies impact organizational publics, interpretive research examines how organizational publics interpret these organizational phenomena. In other words, the emphasis is on the receivers' <u>meanings</u> of organizational action. Interpretive approaches also tend to emphasize the process of organizations and tend to deemphasize their stability (p. 12).

The type of evaluation which lends itself to two-way symmetric public relations can be either functionalist or interpretive, but the model does not fit goal-attainment strategies which segment and prioritize relevant publics with "bottom line" responses projected for each of them. If an organization is solely measuring how publics respond to its initiatives, how "the needle moves," it is quite likely practicing asymmetric public relations with all of its potentially manipulative overtones.

Finally, narrow goal-attainment strategies encounters two of the major "stumbling blocks" to effects-based planning cited by VanLeuven, O'Keefe and Salmon (1988):

> ...treating each public relations campaign as a separate case study due to the absence of common underlying principles that provide a basis of comparison with other campaigns (p.1).
> ...focusing campaign strategy on short-term opinion and attitude change for which the persuasive literature was designed, at the expense of long-term cognitive outcomes as well as behavioral change" (p. 2).

METHODOLOGY

This study began by securing information packets on the Speakes controversy and on public relations measurement and evaluation from the PRSA Information Center. This would be the same information that any public relations practitioner might receive if he sought PRSA assistance for background materials. Standard sources for information in the PRSA file were articles from Public Relations Journal, Public Relations Quarterly, and other trade press sources, chapters from basic texts in public relations, and items from the news media. Items prepared by practitioners for Public Relations Review

were in the file, as were items prepared by public relations faculty members for the trade press. In addition, at the time this process was going on, Ketchum Public Relations released the results of a survey on public relations research, measurement and evaluation. These items were contrasted with several papers on measurement presented at research sessions for either the AEJMC Public Relations Division or the PRSA Educators Section, which were not part of the PRSA file.

PRSA's Information Center furnished nine clippings, plus a PRSA press release and membership letter, on the Speakes controversy. These were supplemented with a copy of the book (Speaking Out: Inside the Reagan White House, written with Robert Pack) and some additional clippings from PR News, a biweekly tabloid that began publication during the period when the Speakes controversy was active.

Since the study dealt with three aspects of Speakes' career--the Geneva summit between Reagan and Gorbachev, his award-winning crisis communications program at Merrill Lynch, and his book promotion--it sought some objective measures on the success of each. It reviewed Editorials on File to test the effectiveness of Speakes' manufactured quote in editorial assessments of the Geneva summit conference. It checked a listing of the 1988 PRSA Silver Anvil winners to confirm a newspaper reference during the Speakes controversy. It mentioned Merrill Lynch winning a trade group award for its handling of the October 1987 stock market crash (Silver Anvil winners are now evaluated on their planning and evaluation strategies). The methodology also included checking the Publisher's Weekly best-seller list to determine if Speakes'

book reached that pinnacle of acceptance.

The results section is divided into two major sections. One was based upon a content analysis of public relations practitioners' comments on the ethical aspects of Speakes disclosure. The other contrasted the results-based commentary which predominated in the 22 items found in the PRSA file on evaluation with more theoretical positions taken by educators seeking models for public relations activities and research methods appropriate to such models.

The results section dealing with practitioners' comments on the ethical aspects of Speakes' behavior sought to determine if there was "an unseemly scramble by members of our 'craft' to seize the moral high ground on the back of a fallen colleague," as Tate had charged. Published comments by practitioners, at least those which were available in the materials collected, were analyzed to see what moral guidance a practitioner facing a dilemma similar to the one Speakes faced at Geneva might find in them.

The results section dealing with public relations measurement techniques sought to contrast short-term project-by-project assessment of Speakes' work with a long-term, career-encompassing approach. It also contrasted the conflict which seems to be rising between short-term research goals enunciated by a majority of practitioners and the broader research goals suggested by educators and the model of public relations which most of them seem to prefer. While these differences in measurement were not a part of the Speakes controversy, the well-known case study which emerged offered an opportunity to discuss such differences in concrete terms.

The section on measurement also suggests brief applications of two theoretical planning models which seem appropriate, in retrospect, to the Speakes case study. The value change campaign planning model built on Milton Rokeach's theory of value change seems appropriate to Speakes' decision to write a kiss-and-tell book about the Reagan administration, particularly one which reflected poorly upon Reagan and the White House press corps. The model is described by James VanLeuven and his associates as "adaptable to relatively personal and intense issues that challenge the self-esteem of those affected" (VanLeuven, p. 9). The cognitive consistency model, from whence Leon Festinger's "cognitive dissonance" theory is derived, seems appropriate to the PRSA reaction to the Speakes controversy. The VanLeuven paper described it as "a particularly useful framework when dealing with tension reduction including crisis communication" (VanLeuven, p. 8).

RESULTS

Perspective on The Speakes Controversy

The brief quotation which Speakes ascribed to President Reagan at the Geneva Conference was one of the few bits of information to survive a press blackout which President Reagan was able to engineer for both parties at the summit meeting. So, with 3,000 reporters at Geneva starved for authoritative information, it received reasonably good play.

Terry Atlas, Chicago Tribune, used the quote to describe the "personal diplomacy" following an interpretive comment: "Both leaders clearly intend to demonstrate to a nervous world that they are reasonable and responsible statesmen seeking to avoid confrontation."

Robert L. Healy and William Beacher, Boston Globe, used the quotation in a paragraph with a lead sentence which stated: "Each leader exulted over the quality of their dialogue prior to yesterday's meeting."

However, the quote (which was later to take on such importance in Speakes' life) was not substantial enough to merit much commentary by the media. A collection of 20 newspaper editorials following the Geneva summit compiled by Editorials on File (1985), made no mention of it. Several other comments by Reagan were mentioned by editorial writers, with the most frequently printed quote coming from his message to Congress upon arrival home: "I can't claim we had a meeting of the minds on such fundamentals as ideology or national purpose--but we understand each other better. That's the key to peace. I gained a better perspective; I feel he did too."

The next phase of Larry Speakes career was as vice president of communications at Merrill Lynch in New York. In this position he introduced Merill Lynch's "A Tradition of Trust" campaign, speaking of the values it underscored: integrity, service, dependability and intelligence.

In the earlier stages of the campaign, when stock market values plunged on October 19, 1987, Speakes' experience as White House spokesman proved invaluable. He was able to persuade Merrill Lynch's publicity-shy chairman, William Schreyer, to appear on network news broadcasts and in commercials aimed at restoring investor confidence:

> An inside source credited him with convincing Merrill Lynch's top executives to appear in commercials that confronted the crisis head-on. The tactic--a first for Merrill Lynch--was a brilliant public relations stroke, a form of image-building that almost transcended advertising while using its basic techniques, several experts said (Advertising Age, 4/25/88).

The campaign was obviously successful. It earned for Merrill Lynch a PRSA Silver Anvil award for emergency public relations. Later, Merrill Lynch returned to his "Trust" theme in advertising. It's annual report published in 1988 continued the theme: "A Tradition of Trust."

While Speakes may have been attempting to serve the cause of integrity by confessing his false quotations in the book about his White House experiences, it was not the sort of integrity desired by Merrill Lynch. Speakes' superiors made it clear they were "uncomfortable" with the controversy that the revelations had caused, and Speakes resigned his $250,000-a-year job.

Even the announcement of Speakes' resignation created an ironic twist in the Speakes' saga:

> (The media release announcing Speakes' resignation) supplied a quotation from unidentified "Merrill Lynch officials" who said: "We accept Larry Speakes' resignation with regret. Larry has made a significant contribution to our firm during his time here." When asked if the remark could be attributed to any individual at the firm, spokesman Peter T. Leach said no. But, he insisted, "it's a genuine quote from Merrill Lynch generally" (Los Angeles Times, 4/16/88).

Finally, Speakes wrote a book to chronicle his activities as "the second most visible person in the country" (Speakes, p. ix). To take full advantage of its impact, he rushed it into print while Reagan was still in office. In the book Speakes settled some old scores, particularly with the White House press corps (chapter: "Beat The Press") and took some of the shine off his former boss as "the great communicator" with a number of insider revelations.

While he certainly did not anticipate the controversy his revelations about the manufactured quotes would stir up, the book followed the basic "kiss-and-tell" pattern of other best sellers by former White House staff members. Speakes' decision to use a co-author, Robert Pack, and to rush the book into print certainly stimulated book sales. If making the Publisher's Weekly best-seller list for eight weeks is a measurable criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of a book promotion effort, Speakes' third public relations "campaign" could be termed as successful as the two earlier ones by conventional measurement standards. The book made the top 15 of hardback best-sellers on May 6, 1988 (10th place). It reached a high of 8th place during the week of June 10 and dropped off the list two weeks later.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Public relations practitioners reacted quite differently to the controversy surrounding Speakes' manufactured quotes. The differences in their expressed viewpoints certainly did not suggest any sense of unanimity on what constitutes ethical behavior in such a circumstance.

Position 1--Manufactured Quotes are Lying

The most hard-line condemnation of Speakes came from those who equated the manufactured quotations with lying, therefore making it unethical behavior for anyone and certainly a violation of any public relations code of professional standards.

Such a position was held by a veteran public relations practitioner in New York City and a former political press aide in Washington, D.C.:

> "In the 34 years I've represented controversial and prominent people, I've never taken it upon myself to make up a quote," said Howard J. Rubenstein, who heads a large PR firm in New York. "I think that goes well beyond reason and creates a false impression that public relations people are manipulative and can't be trusted...I think it's unfortunate. I'm glad he disclosed it though: I think it's an important catharsis," Rubenstein said. "If he said nothing, no one would ever know about it. That would be unfortunate because it would be living with a lie" (Associated Press, 4/14/88).

Frank Mankiewicz, formerly Sen. Robert Kennedy's press secretary and currently a Hill & Knowlton vice chairman in Washington, had this to say:

> "If you attribute a statement to somebody, you better be damned sure he said it," he says. Not even an authorized quote is acceptable unless the president actually uttered it, he says (Wall Street Journal, 4/18/88).

Position 2--Manufactured Quotes Acceptable But Need Clearance

"The problem isn't writing a quote," says Howard Rubenstein, who runs a large New York PR firm. "The problem is that he didn't clear it."

...Jerry Terhorst, Ford Motor Co. director of national public affairs in Washington and former press secretary to President Ford, believes the only way to accurately mirror a politician's view "is to make sure they either give you their own beautiful words or they approve the words you have suggested. The approval, the sign-off is essential." He adds: "If anybody (fabricated quotes) in private life, he should not retain employment." (Wall Street Journal, 4/18/88)

Position 3--Manufactured Quotes Acceptable, But Not Manufactured Conversation in Which They Took Place

An observation by Fred Garcia, APR, principal of Adams & Rinehart:

PR people create quotes all the time, and attribute them to their clients...Every journalist knows (Smith) did not actually utter these words, but newspapers faithfully print the sentence, in quotes, with attribution. When they do, we have done our PR job. So why all the fuss about Speakes' fabrication? The fuss is not over his creating quotes. The fuss is over the fact that he lied. He described a conversation between the President and the General Secretary to the press and said not only that the conversation had taken place but also what the President said in precise words.

He repeated those words several times. Asked what Gorbachev's response had been, he fumbled, then said he had not understood because it was spoken in Russian (Garcia, 4/25/88).

Position 4--Manufactured Quotes Acceptable As Long As They Truly Express Speaker's Intent

Stephen Hess, a Brookings Institution scholar who has written several books on relations between Washington's officials and its press corps asserts there was an inherent "hypocrisy" in the flap over the quotes. The press, he said, was a "bit more outraged than they had a right to be, knowing what they know."

Under the ground rules that are widely known and used by reporters, he said, press secretaries frequently provide quotes they have manufactured. "Press secretaries, if they are any good, are expected to reflect and understand what their bosses' feelings are. And, since they understand the way the information is needed in quotation marks, they make up quotes," Mr. Hess said (New York Times, 4/17/88).

"He doesn't deserve the kind of villication he received," says Robert Dilenschneider, president of Hill & Knowlton, Inc., the nation's largest PR firm and a unit of London-based WPP Group PLC.

"Any time anyone sits down to write a speech for an executive or a press release that reports earnings, they're making up a quote," Mr. Dilenschneider adds. "The key to it all is making sure the quote reflects reality--and that sounds to me like what Speakes did" (Wall Street Journal, 4/18/88).

Position 5--Speakes' Real Crime Was Not Manufactured Quotes, It Was How He Antagonized the Washington Press Corps

"It was a book that was not kind to many people," said UPI White House Bureau Chief Helen Thomas, one of the few prominent White House reporters not attacked in Speakes' book. "The chickens have come home to roost" (Wall Street Journal, 4/18/88).

...The White House press--roundly trashed in one chapter of Larry's book--beat him to a pulp on network TV and in the political columns. The misplaced vanity which I believe motivated him to reveal his fabricated quotes cost him dearly (Tate, 5/9/88).

Position 6--Speakes' Real Crime Was Not Manufactured Quotes, It Was Disloyalty to Reagan

It's not Speakes' revelation that he manufactured statements for the President without informing him that is so regrettable. It's that he violated what he expects us to believe are his own high standards of conduct.

Many of Washington's political pundits have voiced greater indignation over Speakes' revelations than over how those revelations betray fathomless disloyalty. Surely, they know that there's not a press officer around who when the crunch comes doesn't develop statements for the boss. Press officers are expected to carve out special relationships with their principals. In cases where trust is firm (and Speakes wants us to believe that trust was central to his relationship with the President), developing press statements may become part of the job.

What is never part of the job, however, is violating that trust (Cohen, 5/9/88).

A similar view was expressed by Jack Bernstein, columnist in Advertising Age:

The statements (Speakes) issued at the Reagan/Gorbachev summit in Geneva, which have occasioned most of the media comment, were designed to help the president in a losing PR battle.

Would it have been better if he had gotten clearance? Of course. But as the president's spokesman, he felt it would have been worse for Reagan had he stood by idly and let the other side dominate the scene.

For that I believe Speakes should be commended and not condemned. What is unspeakable is that Speakes has now shot his mouth off about something that should have gone unspoken.

And as Jerry Sloan of Ford Motor Co. notes below, "kiss and tell" may prove to be hazardous to the health of PR. Later Bernstein quotes Sloan as saying:

> "If you sign up to be someone's PR officer, you want your principal to share confidences with you so that you have the insight essential to doing your job effectively," (Sloan) said. "If the seed is planted that you may spill your guts about private matters, that confidence may well be withheld" (Bernstein, 5/2/88).

MEASUREMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Practitioner-Educator Dichotomy

Typical of the type of article on measurement most frequently found in the PRSA Information Center file is one by Alfred Geduling, "Make Public Relations Count" (1986). He states that the objectives of public relations may include: "increased sales, distribution gains, increased output, lower costs, reducing product returns, service calls, or complaints, increased inquiries from qualified consumers, strengthened legislative support (voting results), accident reduction (safety gains), turnover reduction."

> ...With goals and objectives like these, strategic communications planning takes on new significance. The function of public relations moves closer to the mainstream of the business and is increasingly accountable for results.
>
> ...The public relations practitioner must determine:
> How the organization wants audiences to behave
> How they behave now (benchmark)
> The kind of change needed
> When it is needed
> How much it is worth to effect the change
>
> ...Measurement/evaluation questions:
> Did tne intended audience get the intended message?
> Did they behave in the intended way?
> Why?
> Was it worth the expense? (Geduldig, p. 31).

In 1988 the "Ketchum Nationwide Survey on Public Relations Research, Measurement and Evaluation," by Dr. Walter K. Lindenmann, Vice President and Director of Research, received responses from public relations professionals in 253 major corporations, financial institutions, utilities, trade associations, non-profit organizations and academic institutions.

Lindenmann had the following comments about the study:

> What is encouraging from a research standpoint is that 57% of all public relations professionals feel it <u>is</u>

possible to measure public relations outcomes, impact, and effectiveness in precise terms. Of these, 21% agree strongly and 36% agree somewhat with that concept. However, 43% feel it is not possible to measure public relations outcomes precisely...

By a 71%-to-28% margin, respondents feel that most public relations research that is done today is for the planning of programs and activities, rather than for measuring and evaluating public relations effectiveness...

The research techniques or methods used most frequently by public relations professionals are information retrieval and publicity tracking or media monitoring. Those rarely used are model building or studies that use unobtrusive measures (Ketchum, 1988).

Some of the comments volunteered by respondents were:

"CEOs talk in numbers, facts, and figures; so must PR practitioners if we are to be taken seriously by corporate leaders" (Financial Institution PR Manager).

"In the past, too much emphasis was placed on research for planning purposes only. In today's business climate, we must be prepared to show our CEOs, through research, the results of our communications programs. More emphasis is needed in this regard" (Corporate Public Relations Executive).

"The decline of PR is a large part due to the lack of monitoring and substantive evaluation of results. That's why PR is seen by CEOs as 'fluff'" (Non-Profit Organization Public Relations Officer).

"PR research should have a place in the practitioner's arsenal. What really is needed, however, is more understanding of how PR research can be used to educate and inform CEOs, CFOs, and product managers. We in PR are often perceived as doing the same kind of things that marketing and advertising specialists do. Yet, we are different. We need researchers to show us techniques that will help underline the differences and emphasize our contributions" (Fortune 500 Industrial Company Executive) (p. 12).

Veteran public relations counselor James B. Strenski, APR, wrote an article in 1981 in which he described "what's new under the measurement sun" in public relations:

Opinion audits--social, economic, political
Communications audits--attitudes of key publics toward communications programs
Peer perception studies--finding out how your company or institution stacks up alongside its competitions against key pre-determined criteria
Clipping and electronic exposure analysis by message, medium, audience and frequency
Environmental monitoring in the social, political and cultural arenas
Dealing in opinions, attitude change, and the psychological nuances of public perceptions which form

> the basis for challenging evaluative attention (p. 16-17).

Strenski doesn't supply any specific evaluative methodology for these objectives, but it is obvious that they require a combination of short-term and long-term measurement techniques. Many of the research outcomes mentioned by Strenski would provide information for a two-way symmetric organization to alter its policies in line with public expectations. To this degree, it is not appropriate to say there is a clear distinction between research envisioned by practitioners and educators. However, in the predominant number of cases such a dichotomy appears real.

One of the articles found in the PRSA file on evaluation was a passionate plea for a long-term view in public relations, written by veteran educator-counselor Philip Lesly in a professional journal:

> ...it (evaluating public relations) will probably determine for years to come what <u>is</u> and what <u>is not</u> considered to be public relations. It will probably determine what public relations people choose <u>to do</u> and <u>what not to do</u>.
>
> ...The problem arises when a manager seeks to evaluate public relations the way he or she evaluates the tangible functions that are most in tune with his or her inclinations and training: sales, production, purchasing, accounting, personnel, transportation. All of those can be measured with numbers--the crisp, clear cut, comfortable, absolute form of measurement.
>
> ...If managements expect to be able to predict and measure quantitatively in public relations, public relations people will be inclined to confine themselves to functions that are predictable and measurable. The best thinking and creativity will be lost. Public relations people are just like other humans; they respond to what is rewarded and avoid what is penalized.

Another educator, Douglas Ann Newsom (1988) adds the relational criteria of "ethics" and "social responsibility" to the more tangible "economic responsibility" (including how people perceive an organization <u>gets</u> its money & how it <u>spends</u> it, "facets of financial responsibility too often

overlooked.")

However, the most instructive contrast between the asymmetric communication approach and the symmetric approach was made by Dervin (1984) in contrasting what she termed the "normative" approach to effects evaluation (assuming that a communicator's message will attain a desired effect) with "sense-making."

As for the normative approach, she said:

> After almost 50 years of such research, the results of the work have been disappointing both for the researcher and the practitioner:
> * It is universally agreed that effects have been hard to find and hard to achieve.
> * The ability of the researcher to predict the conditions that lead to effects is very limited. Further, most of the conditions that do predict effects appear to be entirely outside the control of the practitioner.
> * The most predictable aspects of communication behaviors are the least useful to practitioners. Researchers can predict habit pattern in general media use, for example, but rarely what someone thinks about or will do about some issue.
> * A portrait emerges of the audience that is alternatively pessimistic and resigned. When pessimistic, it pictures the audience as passive, lazy, unconcerned, uninvolved. When resigned, it acknowledges that the audience is busy, involved elsewhere, walking different roads (p. 31).

Dervin then goes on to contrast the core assumptions of Sense-Making with the normative approach. These assumptions obviously call for different evaluative measures than the CEO's desire to see "the needle move."

> * Sense-making starts with the receiver and looks at message use only in terms of how it intersects with the receiver's present, past, and expected future.
> * Sense-making does not presuppose impacts of messages but rather lets receivers define how messages impacted them.
> * Sense-making sees the characteristics and life contexts of receivers not as barriers to and mediators of messages but rather as the contexts within which receivers use messages to make sense of their worlds.
> * Message-using as well as message-making is looked at not as an input-output system but rather as "constructing" activities. In this context, different users can create different sense from the "same" message.

> * Attempts to predict audience responses to messages do not seek to create across time-space portraits but rather on situational contingencies--predicting the different kinds of sense people seek in different kinds of situations (p. 32).

Normative research, applied separately to Speakes' three different public relations activities, would have found him relatively successful in promoting Reagan's communications objectives at Geneva, winning plaudits for Merrill Lynch in the stock market crash aftermath, and writing a best-selling book. "Sense-making," on the other hand, would uncover inconsistencies in such actions which could easily predict the possibility of audiences finding Speakes completely lacking in credibility as a public relations professional.

Theory-Based Planning: Larry Speakes' Value Change Decision

The value change model assumes that value inconsistency occurs when a high-ranking personal value comes into contact with contrary knowledge, attitudes, values or behaviors. Since credibility is one of Speakes' high-ranking personal values, and a valuable one in public relations, he might look upon an opportunity to write a book about the Reagan years in a way that would strengthen such a value.

As indicated earlier, Speakes put great emphasis upon telling the truth. In fact, perhaps because his experience in public relations was that as a press aide rather than as a more comprehensive professional, he equated truth with credibility. This is certainly the journalistic definition of the term. However, the primarily quality of credibility is trustworthiness, and that is made up of more ingredients than truth.

When Speakes decided to write an insider's book about

his White House years, there is no evidence that he sought to integrate the project with his work at Merrill Lynch. In addition, there is no evidence that he attempted to integrate the book with the values of his profession.

Besides truth, there are two essential traits of a public relations practitioner. The first is trust. Any profession based upon relationship building must understand that trust is its fundamental building block. Another value clearly understood by public relations professionals is the importance of anonymity. Many will write articles, speeches, announcements or quotations which will be attributed to others. However, ownership of the remarks immediately passes to the one for whom they are intended. It is not the public relations practitioner's role to later seek the place in history that has been granted to one for whom he or she wrote some immortal lines.

Speakes seemingly wrote the book as a separate part of his life, certainly separating it from the work at Merrill Lynch. He seemed to assume that truth--even a somewhat backbiting insider's "truth"--should not harm his credibility as a public relations professional. He really didn't give much consideration to other prevailing values of his profession or of his current employers.

Yet, in the book, Speakes prized the degree of trust that Reagan placed in him--the type of trust, for instance, which would permit Reagan to let Speakes speak for him in critical circumstances. It does not seem to occur to Speakes that his revelations would be interpreted as a betrayal of that trust by Reagan and those still associated with him.

If Speakes were taking a long view of his professional

life, rather than segmenting it into different careers or "campaigns," it seems impossible that he would not link the values of personal credibility with the values of institutional credibility that he was promoting. Certainly his superiors at Merrill Lynch made such a linkage, and it soon made them "uncomfortable" with their association with him.

Speakes' confession about the manufactured quotes at Geneva was an effort to reassess his own ethical standard as presidential press aide. He said he acted in the urgency of the moment, but now--years later--he had an opportunity to take a longer view of his actions.

In essence, he was introducing for public relations professionals in similar circumstances a value change. He was trying to get others in similar positions to give first priority to the truth and second priority to the communications objectives of the employer or client. It is an important lesson, worthy of consideration.

Unfortunately, the lesson arose in a larger context--another value change. For years Speakes had prided himself on a trust relationship with the president, one that he was now violating. The lesson he was trying to make was drowned out by this action. In addition, his demand for credit for a statement which history had attributed to Reagan seemed particularly unseemly for a public relations professional. It violated a norm of what may constitute a "PR man's license," if there is such a thing.

The value change theory suggests that public relations must build upon existing values. Goals may be accomplished if planners are able to link the present situation with

instrumental values. If a new value is introduced, the audience may be forced to consider both. The effect may be that either the new value will be diminished as it encounters more deeply entrenched beliefs, or that old beliefs will be at least partially neutralized by the obvious value of the new stimulus.

Speakes attempted to advocate literal "truth" rather than the "PR man's license" of manufacturing quotations for a superior. He was hoping to promote a value change by pitting principle against expediency. It is a persuasive concept, but unfortunately Speakes placed his lesson in a context of perceived trust violation and personal aggrandizement. He violated values which are more essential to good relationships than the one he was advocating. For this reason his very successful book was a personal disaster.

Theory-Based Planning: Public Relations Society of America

In reacting to the furor caused by Larry Speakes' revelations, PRSA essentially supported the value change that Speakes was trying to bring about. PRSA found it incredible that a public relations practitioner would supply the news media with the account of a conversation which never occurred.

At the same time, perhaps reacting to sharp questioning on the part of reporters, PRSA officials seemed to suggest that anything short of literal truth, such as a manufactured quote, falls short of the profession's ethical standard. Such a position essentially supports Grunig's model of "public information" public relations--a journalist in residence who simply records conversations as they transpire and reports them to the press. The focus for such an

individual, however, is accuracy rather than building relationships. "Journalist in residence" is a model of public relations sometimes envisioned by news media personnel seeking new employment, but it is not really meaningful to modern public relations professionals.

The value change theory was useful in analyzing what went wrong in Larry Speakes' behavior. Now, in analyzing PRSA's reaction to the Speakes' controversy, another theory is helpful--cognitive consistency. When the Speakes controversy broke, PRSA issued a statement which was not fully consistent with the beliefs held by many public relations practitioners, journalists, and knowledgeable members of the public.

As many of the PRSA practitioners were to say in their own reaction to Speakes' troubles, there is general awareness that the job of a spokesperson is to create purposeful statements for his or her superiors. Therefore, when PRSA seemed to condemn Speakes for such a practice, suggesting that manufactured quotations were, per se, "false and misleading information," it set the stage for Tate's revulsion: "Pardon me while my stomach turns."

Any statement which suggests that public relations practitioners would never do what Speakes did--provide a statement to the news media which carried out his client's or top executive's communications objectives at a time when the client or executive was otherwise engaged--runs up against this prevailing belief. Such a statement creates a form of cognitive dissonance, a state of inconsistent knowledge, in the audience.

This study found six different reactions among practitioners to the Speakes controversy--"Manufactured Quotes

Are Lying," "Manufactured Quotes Acceptable But Need Clearance," "Manufactured Quotes Acceptable, But Not Manufactured Conversation In Which They Took Place," "Manufactured Quotes Acceptable As Long As They Truly Express Speaker's Intent," "Speakes' Real Crime Was Not Manufactured Quotes, It Was How He Antagonized The Washington Press Corps" and "Speakes' Real Crime Was Not Manufactured Quotes, It Was Disloyalty To Reagan."

Experienced practitioners, elected to top office in a professional association, should be aware about the diversity in the profession about the appropriateness of manufactured quotations. Although such a response was the position which reporters wanted to see expressed about the issue, it was certainly not a commentary on the Speakes issue which would bring a sense of unity or cognitive consistency to the profession of public relations.

By making a pronouncement which was not wholeheartedly supported by comments of other public relations professionals, PRSA seemed to support the media's bias that public relations is a field without real ethical standards. It seemed an effort to look upon the Speakes controversy as a one-time, short-term event (giving the press the answer it was seeking to support its own pillory of Speakes) rather than as a way of bringing about long-term understanding of public relations.

There are provisions in the PRSA Code of Professional Standards which apply to Speakes' indiscretion without getting into the thorny issue of manufactured quotes. The attention of the media should have been refocused from the Geneva summit to the "kiss-and-tell" nature of the book itself.

fairly with clients or employers, past and present..." At another point it states, "A member shall safeguard the confidences of both present and former clients or employers..."

PRSA could have taken the opportunity of the Speakes controversy to point out that public relations practitioners occupy a special position of trust with their clients or superiors. It is against the PRSA Code for them to violate these confidences, even after employment ceases. A "kiss-and-tell" book itself, if it takes advantage of this position of trust to damage a former client or employer, is ethically wrong in public relations. Any attempt to take credit for a statement attributed to a former client or employer is taking unfair advantage of that individual--who could have blown the whistle on the spokesperson immediately after the quotation was issued to the press. Trust is a two-way relationship, and that is what public relations is all about.

This is not the pronouncement that the press would like to hear. The news media love whistle-blowers, and "kiss-and-tell" books are seen as a way of getting at underlying truth, but the news media are not noted for having strong relationships. In fact, they disdain them; they consider them "conflicts of interest." This is the primary line of tension between journalism and public relations, not truth vs. falsehood. PRSA lost an opportunity to make this distinction by not framing the Speakes issue as a question of disloyalty rather than a question of falsehood--a position, under the circumstances, which would have been helpful to Larry Speakes and anyone in a similar situation who might come after him.

A PRSA statement of this nature would have reset the agenda for discussion of public relations ethics. It would have been an arena in which public relations practitioners would have demonstrated far more unanimity than over literal truth vs. manufactured quotes. More important, from the standpoint of communications theory, such a stand would have cognitive consistency. The prevailing view about public relations is that practitioners act out of loyalty to the organization which they serve, even if they at times disagree with the policy. A statement which reaffirms client or employer loyalty, including past employers, would turn no one's stomach except those practitioners who are planning "kiss and tell" books. And these are practitioners from which the profession generally would like to distance itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the somewhat unfair advantage of hindsight, this study was able to show how there is nothing so practical as a good theory. It suggests that if somehow Larry Speakes would have taken the importance of prevailing values into consideration before introducing a value change that he might never have written the book that he did. He might not have written a best seller, but he would still have a $250,000 job and an unblemished future in public relations.

It also suggests that if PRSA had practiced cognitive consistency--taking into consideration existing beliefs--it would have emphasized the "loyalty" items in its Code to condemn Speakes' actions rather than its "truth" items. By doing this PRSA would have saved itself and the profession some embarrassment over contrasting views on how to handle manufactured quotes. PRSA's statement created cognitive dissonance; it ran afoul of existing beliefs. On the other hand, a statement devoted to the importance of confidentially to the trust relationship in public relations would not meet with a degree of professional unanimity.

The study suggests that both Speakes and PRSA may have been led to take self-defeating actions because they were thinking of short-term, narrowly focused benefits rather than the larger picture. If Speakes' career were examined as unrelated units, a case can be made that he was extremely successful at Geneva with a manufactured quote, that he was exercising award-winning acumen at Merrill Lynch with a "Tradition of Trust" campaign, and he wrote a block-buster book. However, when these elements are combined, as they were in Speakes' career record, the result was a disaster.

The same might be said for PRSA. It succeeded in getting "good press." It distanced itself and the profession from Speakes. Yet, it did so in a way that produced contradictory statements among public relations professionals and, at least in one case, a sense of revulsion.

Part of the study deals with the disparity between the goals of the profession and the ideals of public relations educators. The growing concern for accountability forces public relations professionals to play the chief executive's game--planning campaigns with short-term organizational goals in mind. In many cases, publics are expected to act in a way that the organization desires them to act. This is typical of the asymmetrical model of public relations that Grunig finds counterproductive to building mutual understanding. It is designed to persuade. Educators, on the other hand, are more likely to advocate models in which audiences "make meaning" from the organization's communications, and that meaning, whatever it is, guides the organization into future actions which will be consistent with audience expectations.

An even larger issue not discussed here but raised by the discussion of measurement is: Who controls the professional norms in public relations? Beam cites Terence J. Johnson (Professions and Power, p. 45): "A profession is not, then, an occupation, but a means of controlling an occupation." Most articles dealing with short-term public relations measurement suggest that the chief executive officer is calling the tune. If public relations professionals cannot produce the kind of results that the CEO desires, then the CEO will get some other type to run the communications program.

Beam goes on to cite Friedson (in Dingwall and Lewis, The Sociology of the Professions, 1983, pp. 19-37) as distinguishing between the administrative principle and occupational principle in governing professional conduct. Under the administrative principle, the legitimate authority for the organization of work rests in the office of the administrator or manager. Under the occupational principle, "the central, strategic task of organizing work is formulated, controlled and evaluated by workers." It is the prerogative of an occupational group to create and direct the substance, performance and goals of its work.

Beam suggests:

> ...(T)he more professionalized the occupational group, the greater the degree of control the occupational group has relative to other social actors operating within a specific organizational setting. For highly professionalized occupations, the occupational group itself becomes the primary agent of social control across organizational settings. It has authority over the terms of work for its members in an organizational setting. The structure of the organization--by structure I mean its patterned or regularized actions--is shaped to accommodate the terms for work generally established by the occupational group. (p. 15)

As Lesly indicated in the article quoted at length earlier in this paper, if public relations practitioners confine themselves solely to numerical measures imposed upon them by tangible-minded managers, they are apt to sacrifice the heart of the profession--"judgment, perspective, initiative and ideas" which will help the organization and its publics understand each other in a world that cries out for mutual interdependence rather than a win-lose persuasive mentality. It's a matter which is fundamental to the whole concept of "excellence in public relations".

# # #

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